

## Pentecost!

Acts 2:1-21 (and John 15:26-27 with John 16:4b-15)

Hopefully you've read the Acts passage. As you read this passage, I wonder what thoughts you had or what struck you about the events in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost two thousand years ago.

Perhaps you were reminded of the wind that we experienced at the end of last week, its power and the noise it makes. I wonder whether you thought about the recent news coverage of the Jerusalem and Palestine conflict.

Perhaps you wondered about the tongues of fire, or the languages the disciples were suddenly able to speak, and the boldness of Peter addressing the crowd . . . Hang on! Wasn't this the same group of disciples who, only seven weeks ago, locked themselves in their room for fear of the Jewish authorities? Wow, what a transformation!

Or perhaps you wondered about the many thousands of Jews who were in Jerusalem for their festival. There were devout Jews from every nation under heaven; for some of them it was an annual pilgrimage.

The closest I've been to being on a pilgrimage is a visit, three summers ago, to Lourdes in France, Europe's largest Christian pilgrimage site. Lourdes has become a major place of Roman Catholic pilgrimage and of miraculous healings since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; about 5-million people from all around the world visit each year. If visitors to Lourdes could be categorized, then Julia and I would have been labelled 'curious onlookers' as opposed to 'devout followers.'

On the evening of our visit, we joined the candlelight procession, with probably 8-10 thousand people. The majority were in their own people-groups; there were languages I didn't recognise; there were flags I couldn't identify. English speakers seemed to be the minority, and this was also apparent when, next morning, we attended a Mass for English speakers – English wasn't the first language of a good number present.

As an illustration, imagine the priests in Lourdes are English and only able to speak English. If suddenly every single person there could hear the priests speaking in their own languages, they would be astonished and amazed. And they would say, "These men who are speaking are all English, aren't they?"

The point is that the disciples in Jerusalem were filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enabled them to speak in tongues or languages they had not learned. And the Jews in Jerusalem that day heard about the remarkable and mighty things that God had done in their own language. The Holy Spirit of God had grabbed their attention.

What Jesus had promised the disciples just ten days previously had come true. Jesus had told his disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you . . ." (Acts 1:8). But I wonder whether this is what they were really expecting. Perhaps they thought it might be a quiet confidence that filled them as they prayed. Did they imagine it would be as explosive or dynamic as this?

The starting point of Pentecost, and the birth of the Christian Church, begins as an outward explosion in Jerusalem, that ripples throughout the Middle East and eventually further, fulfilling Jesus' promise that his disciples would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria . . . and even to the ends of the earth. The rippling effect keeps on going. And we, as Christ's disciples today, have a part to play. I hope you consider yourselves to be a disciple of our Lord Jesus Christ, even if you consider yourself only a novice; as disciples we are always learning – and don't forget, even the first disciples often got it wrong!

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the story at the heart of the universe, yet the Church now finds itself in a culture that has largely forgotten this good news. How can we now convey the extraordinary love of God to those around us?

The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book for 2021 is Hannah Steele's "Living His Story – Revealing the extraordinary love of God in ordinary ways." Yes, it is a book about evangelism. But by exploring the accounts of Jesus and his first disciples, especially through the book of Acts, the aim of Steele's book is to help us recover our confidence in evangelism as his followers today. I've selected some of her thoughts to share with you.

Just as the work and witness of the Spirit is integral to the book of Acts, the work and witness of the Spirit is integral to Christian mission and evangelism in the Church today. Evangelism is impossible without the Holy Spirit.

Evangelism's starting point is our recognition that if the gospel is the story in which we find our identity and purpose, then evangelism has to do with the whole of our lives and the way we live them. Our primary task is not convincing people our way of thinking is right but inviting them to participate within this story of the risen Jesus.

Evangelism's starting point might be simply to help others become curious about Jesus. Isn't this what happened in Jerusalem on that Pentecost Sunday? While we may think of Pentecost as an encounter with the power of the Holy Spirit, it was also fundamentally a movement in accessibility: the barrier of language was removed as people were able to hear the good news of the risen Jesus in a way they could understand.

This theme continues to work throughout the book of Acts (and I encourage you to read though all of it) constantly propelling the disciples out of their comfort zones to encounter people and communities, some of whom they suspected might be beyond the scope of the Spirit's work. We need this similar movement of the Spirit now to enable us to speak the good news of Jesus in a way people can understand and receive. Are we prepared to be propelled out of our comfort zone to take risks and embrace the unfamiliar?

And so, the question that remains for us: where is the Spirit leading us today? Where is the new place or destination to which we are being drawn in witness? Where is the Spirit already urging us to make the journey – literal or metaphorical – so that the gospel can find its way through us to the ends of the earth? Where are the places in our society or our own community where we imagine the gospel might not be able to find a home – the "ends of the earth" kind of places on our doorstep? Where is God calling us to go? Where is God calling you and me to go?

It is our task, as Christ's disciples, to witness to the good news in whatever context we find ourselves. Whether in our homes, amongst our family or neighbours, or in our workplaces, or wider community, the good news of the extraordinary love of God needs to be spoken with compassion, sensitivity and boldness by ordinary people, that is, by you and me.

The *Thy Kingdom Come* global wave of prayer that has been taking place over the last ten days has been an opportunity for us to pray for friends, family, neighbours and colleagues. There is no reason why we should limit this prayer to these ten days. I urge you to continue praying and asking God to fill you with his Holy Spirit so that you too can reveal the extraordinary love of God to others.

Amen.

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